

# A Spinster's Thanksgiving

by HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD

**M**ISS ANNA SPARRER lingered at her breakfast table, dividing her attention between an open letter lying by her plate, and a teaspoon she was balancing on the edge of her cup.

She lived alone, and felt her loneliness keenly. She was rather a bright woman, and she tried to be a good one; but she wasn't pretty, and she had never had a lover in her whole life.

All the other Sparrers had gone to try the further life of the unknown. Even the house had been changed, as one-half of it had been sawed off and moved away; and the scars were covered now by a huge grape-vine that grew as if it knew what was expected of it. She had covered part of the inside wall by her beautiful mahogany secretary with its bevelled glass, its brass inlay and exquisite metal mounts. She expended much time and labor on that brass; and she always felt that her dead and gone people were doing something for her as she did so, since at such times she was unable to think of her loneliness.

Miss Sparrer's loneliness oppressed her. She looked at other women with their husbands and children with silent envy. If one of those boys were hers! But she checked the thought as an indecency. And there! If she had ten sons, what in the world could she have done with them? She, who could barely keep herself! But it would be so pleasant to see them growing, their minds and souls expanding, to have only one of them come storming in snowy weather, to have his love and companionship, his arms clasped round her neck, his head lying on her shoulder, when at twilight she told stories and sang songs and they exchanged the day's confidences together. Oh, how bitterly lonely she was! She hadn't even cat, for she couldn't afford meat for one, and there wasn't a mouse in the house. And she didn't like cats, either. She was afraid of them; and they made her sneeze. She would have been glad of a dog. But there again—a dog liked his bone. So one dull day was like another; and although she was not unhappy, she constantly felt how much happier she might be, with some one to love and some one to love her.

Miss Sparrer held herself rather loftily. Her father had been the village ne'er-do-well, indulged, beloved, pitied and pardoned by every one. But his father had been the Doctor, and the father before that the Lawyer and Squire of the place. There are some things that long descent make obligatory, fine manners, and a certain kindly condescension among them. And in those Miss Sparrer never failed. She maintained the tradition of her great grandfather's hospitality by a tea-party in Winter, along towards March when her hens were laying well, at which all the parish was made welcome; the refection of which, it was understood, was to be scrambled eggs, her famous cream o'tartar biscuits, with some of the honey of her two hives, and a dish of peach preserves. The little peachtree, if the Summer were warm, gave her a few jars, and they were treasured so long that they were candied.

In Summer she gave a garden party to the same guests, who each brought her own basket. And if with any generous intention they brought more than could be used, the next day Miss Anna made a round of brief visits, taking to Mrs. Green some of Mrs. Brown's delicious cakes, and to Mrs. Brown some of Mrs. White's flaky tarts, and to Mrs. White some of Mrs. Green's delicate ruskis, so it could be seen that none of these dainties were reserved by herself.

On the contrary, she often bestowed charity. There was Andrew MacLane—how many a time had she called him in and given him a slice of bread and butter, spread thickly with brown sugar? How many a time had she given him a penny? She had gone without her dinner more than once, in order to feed a hungry tramp. It gave her a sweet sense of the bountiful behavior of some fictitious lady of the manor.

Andrew, at any rate, had an idea that Miss Sparrer was a person of vast riches and exalted rank; and he always stopped pitching coppers and swearing at the other boy when she passed by. But Andrew knew nothing of her multitudinous economies. To him she was the "lovely lady richly dressed" of the ballad.

Even those who did know of those economies felt, in some mysterious way, that she was one defrauded of her rights. Some of the splendor of the old squire hung about her still; and they took her on her own valuation, as people will, and felt honored by her recognition and her calls. They would have been sure that anything she chose to do was propriety itself, and they enjoyed their rather ceremonious half hours in the parlor where the generations-old carpet was too threadbare to discover the pattern, a room quaint with well-kept Chippendale and Sheraton furniture,—although no one knew that it was Chippendale or Sheraton,—and illuminated with bits of precious china. But they smiled at the ancient spindle-legged English piano, whose strings, with their cracked tinkle, had known no tuner in a half-century, but which might have been worth nearly its weight in gold for its maker, its age, its shape, its inlay of ivory.

Poor as poverty, Miss Anna Sparrer sat in the midst of wealth but knew it not. This was Grandmama's, and that was Grandpapa's; and in that harp-backed chair Mama was sitting when Papa proposed; and in the drawers of that low-boy she kept her marriage-certificate, and her fan, and her few love-letters; and at this thousand-legged breakfast-table, larger than by a leaf or more, they had all sipped their tea or their port after blessing had been asked. The things stood to her in the place of people and of family; for they were thronged with memories.

And when the old clock in her little vestibule pealed the hour, she heard again her grandfather's voice as he drove into the yard on a snowy day, and the lingering cadence after it had struck was like the sweetness in her father's voice when he sat singing songs of Robby Burns, and sipping something he called mountain-dew. The gilt-edged cut-glass tumbler that held his toddy, the spoon with which he stirred it, with its crest of a sparrowhawk, were things as sacred as if he had been a saint instead of an immensely good-natured scamp. One day, when Andrew brought her daily pint of milk

from Mrs. Burrage who gave him his living, such as it was, for his chores, she had him sit at the table and share her breakfast, and she gave him her own egg, and buttered him generous slices of toast, and made a new overcoat whether the box goes to Simpooraband or not!"

"My father would enjoy its doing a kind office, I know," she thought with a smile. She scoured it, however, a little, afterward. "Somehow, it always seems as if an angel and a—an evil spirit, were contending in me," she murmured, as she did it.

But Andrew had enjoyed his breakfast. It seemed to him banqueting could go no further. To have such breakfasts as that,—she had added a little of her peach syrup to it,—Miss Anna Sparrer must possess unbounded riches. At Miss Burrage's he would have had cold porridge, and not enough of that. Miss Sparrer had enjoyed the breakfast, too; she had liked to see his hearty appetite,—her own picking was very dainty; it had been pleasant to see his eyes brighten, his freckled face grow rosy, to see him laugh and show all the white teeth in his wholesome mouth. She had thought him a little dull, maybe; but it was plain that if his little body were well-nourished his intelligence might thrive with it. It was a pity, she thought, that

"Heart alive!" said Miss Anna, when he had gone. "If religion's worth having, it's worth paying for. And that dear man's going to have a good, substantial new overcoat whether the box goes to Simpooraband or not!"

Th: Minister's visit remained with Miss Anna like something uncomfortable in the digestion. And she was quite low-spirited, with a sense of not having done all her duty, sitting in the twilight by her small fire whose flicker flashed here and there and made a brightness in the room, when she was startled by a noise outside the window, and then by the sight of the faces pressed so closely against the pane that the noses and lips were mere bite and white blotches. Immediately afterwards came a tap at the door;—Miss Anna never opened the door after dark without inquiring who was there.

"Oh, it's only us!" came a girl's voice. "We want to come in just a moment, if you'll let us. We want to see you on some very important business."

She opened the door carefully, the poker in her other hand, and two young women came in.

"Oh!" exclaimed one of them. "We were going by, and you hadn't pulled down your shades, and the room looked so like an old picture in the firelight!"

"And we saw the shining of your wonderful mahogany!" cried the other. "And we felt we must see it

mother had dressed to be married before it. It had reflected the young bridal beauty of her great-grandmother! Sell it! She opened the door, and the young women found themselves outside, and heard the bolt snap without another word spoken.

And then Miss Anna pulled down her shades vindictively, and sat down and cried with anger, and an assurance of having been treated with grievous impertinence. And then she felt how miserably lonely she was, with no one to screen her from such behavior, and what a barren waste her life was, with no one to care for her, and she caring for no one. But as it was prayer-meeting night, and the bell just ringing, she put on her things, and went and forgot herself and her little woes in the service, and walked home in the snapping frost of the November night under an immense sky full of blazing stars that a high wind seemed to blow into white flame, quite light-hearted and content, forgetting for the moment how lonesome she was, and the way in which those young women had brought home to her the fact not of her wealth but of her poverty.

She had just put away her cup and saucer, the next morning, when Andrew appeared at the door with a small turkey in his arms. "Mis' Burrage said m'be you'd like to buy one of her turkeys," he said. "She's got ten. An' they're good ones. I've tended on 'em all Summer. Taint hurry big. You can have it for a dollar."

pretty bad and quite irresponsible. She knew exactly what had happened. Johnny had sold those turkeys to other people one by one, of course. There was no one in the village who would buy ten turkeys at once. And he had spent the money at the tavern over by Starveye Cove.

Now the question was, should she let the affair go, and remain under the stigma of having taken a poor woman's property and refused to pay for it, or should she give over to Mrs. Burrage's an have perhaps a vulgar altercation with her, and any way, challenge Johnny with his wrong doing. Either way was difficult to her. The third way, that of giving the woman ten dollars, was not only to acknowledge herself in the wrong, but was impossible.

First Miss Anna looked at the note with its smears and blurs, written in pencil on a blank leaf torn from a book and then looked at her teaspoon as if for inspiration and guidance. She had always supposed the nest on that spoon, worn to a mere outline now, was a sparrow, inferring that the family name was corruption from that word. But the Minister had told her that, on the other hand, it was a sparrowhawk, and probably marked the robber prowess of her ancestry. That is to say their cruelty, she thought. And she recognized the sparrowhawk in her nature that would challenge and defy Mrs. Burrage and her simple-minded boy.

But that spoon—it was the one which had been always used by her ne'er-do-well father who had a kind word and an open purse—small though it was for every one. And then she felt the father in herself while wishing she had the ten dollars to give and be done with it.

Reluctantly Miss Anna warmed her overshoes, and dallied getting into her cloak and tying her bonnet and adjusting herippet.

"My Johnny!" said Mrs. Burrage indignantly. "Ain't you ashamed, Miss Sparrer? A poor feeble-minded boy like that!"

"Mrs. Burrage," said Miss Sparrer with dignity, "I bought one turkey, and I paid Andrew a dollar for it, and I bought no more."

"You paid Andrew a dollar! He never give me no dollar; That's where it is! That's where it is! My Johnny, I guess! Here!" And she led Miss Anna, without asking if she would or no, into the bedroom where Andrew lay burning with fever.

"Andrew MacLane!" she cried. "You jest git up outta that bed this minute and tell me the truth about them turkeys!"

There was a moment's silence, and then a sullen voice muttered, "I told you."

"No, you didn't. You told a lie to me. You—"

"I told you all I'm goin' ter," said the sullen voice. "Ef you don't say jes' what happened about them turkeys, Andrew, I'll send you to the poorhouse before dark! And I'll tan ye 'tchin an inch o' yer life inter the bargain! You hear me?"

The boy said nothing.

"You hear me?" she said again.

"Oh, Mrs. Burrage, don't speak so!" exclaimed Miss Sparrer. "The child is sick."

Then Andrew looked up with his big burning eyes, started and dazed, seeing the lovely lady. "Andrew," said she, "have you told the truth?"

He closed his eyes as if to shut out a nightmare; but still he said nothing. Mrs. Burrage stood with her hands on her hips, waiting.

"Andrew, you must speak," said Miss Anna. "You must tell Mrs. Burrage the truth."

Still obstinate silence.

"Andrew!" said Miss Anna. She stood there gazing down on him, knowing that she looked dominant and overbearing. But her heart was full of pity. She didn't know what to do. He must be made to speak of course. But he was so little, so poor, so ill, so weak—it was shameful of her to take advantage of the difference between them. She seemed to herself an oppressor, a cruel and ignoble creature. She would let it go. She would tell Mrs. Burrage there had been some mistake and she should have her ten dollars when the next Savings Bank dividend came in.

A noise in the other room called Mrs. Burrage away a moment. Miss Anna was just about to follow. And then the boy looked up again with those great shining eyes and burst out crying. "I meant to pay it back!" he whispered between his sobs.

"Oh, Andrew!" cried Miss Anna. "I'm so sorry!"

"So'm! Oh, so'm!" he sobbed pitifully. "I feel so awful bad!"

"Andrew! Andrew! You poor child!" cried Miss Sparrer, stooping over him. "I forgive you this minute! God will forgive you; I know He will. You'll never do it again."

"Oh, you bet I won't!" sobbed Andrew, with deep conviction.

"You get right up and come home with me. I won't leave you here another day!" For in the instant there flashed over her the glory of a new world of possibilities. That furniture! If she sold it for any such sum as those young women said, and invested that, the interest would give her all the money she needed to bring Andrew up, and educate him and then start him in life with the prospect. She didn't want to do it; she hated to do it—but she must. You could see there was something in the boy. She could not leave him here in these influences let come what would come. She would not! She must take him home and make an honest man of him. That is what the Minister meant. And oh, thank heaven, she would never be lonesome again!

Almost at the point of tears herself with her strangled thoughts, she bent and put her arms about the hot and fevered boy, and held his head on her breast, and kissed him, and began to love him from that moment. "There's where ain't nobody kissed me since Bates was hurt!" he sobbed.

Miss Anna borrowed ten dollars of the Minister that day, and satisfied Mrs. Burrage. And the two young women who came with their vams the next week to bring her the modern furniture and take away the old, stayed to hang their gift of some pretty silk curtains at the windows, a lot to put in place the new things made so much after the pattern of the old that she need not fear the difference very keenly.

"I suppose you don't want to sell that old silver? It's quite thin," said one of them. "It's really worth a great deal of money."

"Well, no!" said Miss Anna. "It is old family silver. And my boy—Andrew—will grow up some day and like it with the family crest on it. But I'm going to make you a present of two of the spoons. For you've made a great, a tremendous, present! You've given me this boy, and days and nights that will never grow old.

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"She took the boy on her knee when they had gone, and tea was cleared away, and told him a Bible story, and sang him an old ballad; it was yet an hour before prayer-meeting. In the firelight the rooms looked much as they had done before. It was only a matter of sentiment. That was in a way dead sentiment. But this was alive, alive, and made life worth living! She could love her own dear people still, without their old furniture. But she couldn't have this dear boy to love, and the furniture, too. "Tomorrow is Thanksgiving," she said, as she tucked him into bed before the bell rang. "But for you and me, Andrew lad, I think hereafter it will be Thanksgiving every day of our lives!"

THERE WAS ANDREW MACLANE—HOW MANY A TIME HAD SHE CALLED HIM IN AND GIVEN HIM A SLICE OF BREAD AND BUTTER SPREAD THICKLY WITH BROWN SUGAR?

poor little Andrew had fallen on such hard lines. But what was the use? If she were a rich woman—Well, well if Rome had never fallen London had never risen.

Occasionally the Minister came to see Miss Sparrer. He found her one day sewing on some garments that the Missionary Society was to send to Simpooraband, on the other side of the world.

"And oh, if you want to sell we want to buy, any of it, all of it—"

"And we give good honest prices!"

"I have nothing to sell," said Miss Sparrer icily, not asking her guests to sit down, and angry with herself and with them that she so violated the laws of hospitality.

"Now you musn't be offended," said the first one, "it's nothing personal, you know. It's simply a commercial matter. You don't know what wealth you have in these things! Perhaps you don't know that we could give you two hundred dollars for that secretary, still make a profit on it, and one hundred for the clock, and as much more for the high-boy and the low-boy, and twenty-five dollars a-piece for these chairs—"

"Yes!" cried the other coming back from the little dining-room where she had ventured. "Any day you care to sell us the furniture in these two rooms, we can give you some good modern furniture, looking very much like it, only—well—made yesterday—but your neighbors would never know the difference—and let me see—five and five are ten and ten and ten are twenty, and—yes, all of three thousand dollars in money. And of course," she went on so breathlessly that Miss Anna hadn't the chance to put in a word, "we won't ask you to decide on the spot. But there's one catch; and any day, if you should think well of it, after turning it over, you can drop us a postal, and we will attend to it at once."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Miss Anna, her thimble on her lips. "But this doesn't belong to me. It belongs to the Society. And I don't believe I have a thing myself that anyone can wear. But I'll tell the Society—it wants to do about what's right, you know."

"Certainly. Perhaps they can do this and not leave the other undone," said the Minister. "There's that poor little Andrew MacLane, too. That unfortunate boy troubles me sorely. He is growing up to bad ends, where he is; and there's good in him. Johnny Burrage had the chance to put in a word. "we won't ask you to decide on the spot. But there's one catch; and any day, if you should think well of it, after turning it over, you can drop us a postal, and we will attend to it at once."

"Only," said the other, "we would advise you not to delay, because the craze for these things may stop any day and the prices go down. It would be a pity for you to lose the chance. You are sure you don't want to sell to-day? That old looking-glass, for instance?"

"That looking-glass! Her mother and her grand-

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